The Feynman Technique

The Feynman Technique is a popular learning method inspired by Richard Feynman, an American physicist who shared the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1965. Feynman was famous for explaining difficult ideas in plain words, and he often stressed that knowing the name of something is not the same as understanding it. The technique turns this into four simple steps, which Feynman did not publish himself. The steps are to choose a concept, explain it simply, find the gaps and simplify with analogies. We follow Mariam, a junior accountant, as she learns the idea of depreciation.

1. Choose One Concept

The first step is to choose one concept and write its name at the top of a blank page. One concept is enough, because a small target is easier to explain than a whole subject. We also write what we want to be able to do afterwards, such as explaining it to a colleague. A clear target tells us when we have understood.

Example: A cyclist wants to understand gears. The cyclist uses the first step: one word goes at the top of the page, gears, and not the whole bicycle. The small target makes the next steps easy to start.

At work: Mariam must explain depreciation to her team. She applies the first step: she writes depreciation at the top of a page, and under it, explain it to a new colleague in two minutes. Her goal is now clear and small.

2. Explain It Simply

The second step is to explain the concept in simple words, as if teaching someone who knows nothing about it. We write or say the explanation without notes and avoid jargon. If we must use a technical word, we explain it too. Simple words force us to show what we really understand, because we cannot hide behind complicated language.

Example: A student explains to a younger cousin how a fridge works. She uses the second step, explain it simply: cold is just heat taken from the inside and moved to the back, with no technical words. The cousin nods and asks a good question.

At work: Mariam explains depreciation on paper: when a company buys a laptop, it does not count the whole cost in one year, but spreads it over the years of use. She writes it in simple words, without notes. Her first draft is clear, but one sentence is vague.

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3. Find the Gaps

The third step is to find the gaps. Wherever our explanation becomes vague, hesitant or full of jargon, we have found something we do not yet understand. We return to the source, read that part again and then try to explain it again. Gaps are useful, because they show exactly where to study next.

Example: A cook explains a recipe aloud and realises that she cannot say why the dough must rest. She applies the third step, find the gaps: she checks a cookbook and learns that resting makes the dough easier to shape. Next time, she explains the reason too.

At work: Mariam notices that she cannot say how many years the laptop is used. She finds the gap, rereads the company policy and learns the useful life it applies. Her explanation now includes the number of years.

4. Simplify and Use Analogies

The fourth step is to simplify. We rewrite the explanation in the shortest clear form and add an analogy from everyday life. Then we test it on a real person, and any new questions show remaining gaps. We repeat the cycle until the explanation is short, clear and correct.

Example: A teacher explains electric current with the picture of water flowing in a pipe. Using the fourth step, an analogy, the teacher turns an abstract idea into something children can imagine. The class understands the idea more quickly.

At work: Mariam compares depreciation to a car that wears down a little each year, so its cost is spread over the years of use. She tests the explanation on a colleague, who repeats it correctly. The explanation is now short enough for the team meeting.

Conclusion

In summary, the Feynman Technique is a learning method inspired by Richard Feynman's way of explaining ideas in plain words. We choose one concept, explain it simply, find the gaps and simplify with an analogy. Each gap is useful because it shows what to study next. If we can explain an idea simply and correctly, we understand it much better than if we only recognise it.

Sources

- The Nobel Prize in Physics 1965: Richard P. Feynman (biographical facts) – https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/physics/1965/feynman/facts/
- Feynman, R. P. (1988). What Do You Care What Other People Think? W. W. Norton (his view that knowing a name is not understanding; book, no link).
- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Richard Feynman – https://www.britannica.com/biography/Richard-Feynman
- The four-step "Feynman Technique" is a popular learning method inspired by Feynman's way of explaining; he did not publish it himself.

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