

The role of memory in shaping the future of digital learning: a mnemohistorical exploration

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Introduction

The relationship between memory and digital transformation in education is something that's becoming increasingly important. As schools, universities, and other learning institutions move from face-to-face to online learning, we have to think about how memories of past educational practices shape these changes. We often don't realise how much our collective memory—shaped by history, culture, and the way institutions have been built over time—impacts how we approach education today. This article will go into how *mnemohistory*—the study of memory and its impact on the present and future—can help us understand this transition in digital learning (Tamm, 2024). To provide a more direct explanation, it looks at how our memories of past educational practices influence how we *perceive*, *accept*, or *reject* new tools and systems in learning.

Digital tools in education, from online platforms to AI-driven learning systems, are reshaping how we approach teaching and learning. However, these changes don't come without resistance. The memory of 'traditional' methods—such as the classroom experience, textbooks, and exams—continues to hold influence. This creates a tension where the past and present collide, with nostalgia for the 'old ways' often making people hesitant to embrace digital tools. While the work of Tamm (2024) provides foundational insights into this concept, it would be useful to explicitly define *mnemohistory* here to better frame the discussion: by considering these shifts through the lens of memory, one can better understand why digital learning is both *embraced* and *resisted*, and in doing so, one can also navigate the future of education and reimagine the possibilities of learning in the digital age. This piece reflects my personal perspective as I critique these changes.

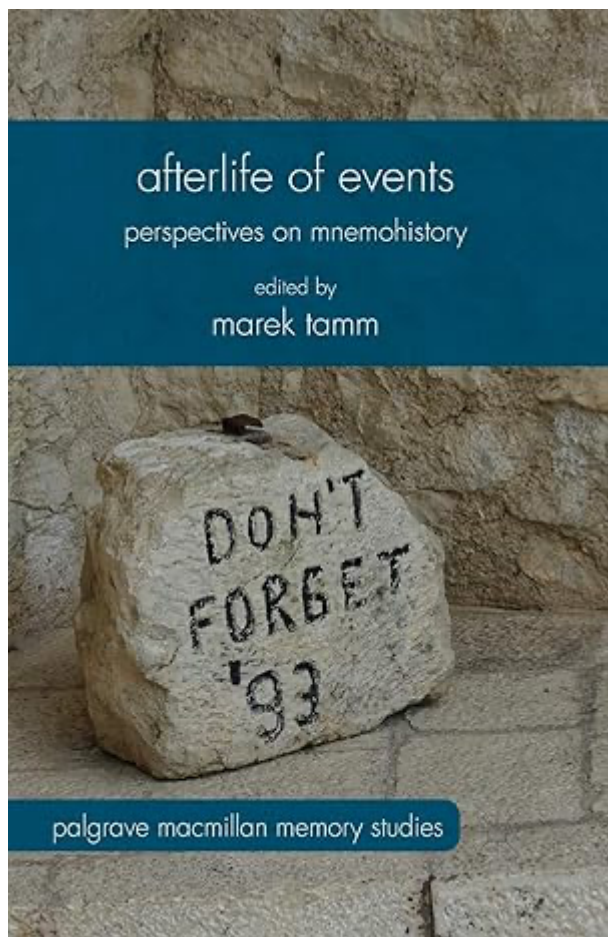
Understanding mnemohistory

Mnemohistory is a concept that looks at how collective memory—our shared understanding of the past—affects the present and future. The idea is that memory isn't just something individual; it's something we all carry as a society, and it shapes everything from our cultural practices to our institutional norms (Tamm, 2008 ; Tamm, 2024). The French historian Pierre Nora's idea of *lieu de mémoire* (places of memory) is a good starting point here. These places—whether they're monuments, books, or even stories—represent what we

remember about the past, and they help us make sense of the present. These memories are about what happened and also how we interpret those events and how they shape the way we see the world today. When we apply this to education, one might interpret it as that the past has a major influence on how we see education today. The traditional model—classrooms, teachers in front of a chalkboard, exams, and textbooks—has been ingrained in our memory, and even now, these models are the baseline for how we think education should look. Mnemohistory helps us think about how these memories of traditional education influence how we approach digital tools today.

Figure 1

The book cover for Afterlife of Events: Perspectives on Mnemohistory (2015), edited by Marek Tamm.



Note. This book—one of my personal favourites—rearticulates the traditional relationship between past, present, and future by expanding historiography to include the lasting impact and meanings of events, while also proposing a redefinition of the term ‘event’ through diverse perspectives.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137470188>

The memory of education and traditional learning models

In the educational world, memory plays a role in shaping what's considered 'valid' or 'authentic' learning (Davies & Wright, 2010). The educational systems—whether formal or informal—carry forward practices, values, and even biases that reflect the times and ways of learning from the past. Education, for the most part, has been a very *structured* process, with an emphasis on face-to-face learning, written exams, and fixed curricula. When we look at digital learning tools today, it's plausible to see how these traditional memories can complicate the introduction of online or tech-driven teaching.

In many ways, memory becomes a source of resistance. Teachers who've been in classrooms for decades, students who've always learned using textbooks, and institutions that are steeped in these traditions can find it hard to embrace digital tools. There's an emotional attachment to how things have been done. But it's not just about resisting technology—it's also about how our *collective* memories of education, from a social and cultural perspective, influence how we see new things in the educational world (Taylor & Johnsen, 1986).

Nostalgia and the resistance to change

One of the biggest challenges in integrating digital tools into education is the strong sense of *nostalgia* for traditional learning methods. For many people, the idea of sitting in a physical classroom, interacting with a teacher, writing by hand, and using textbooks feels 'real' or 'authentic' (Tagg et al., 2023). It's what they remember about their own experiences, and it holds a certain emotional value. But this nostalgia for the 'old school' way of doing things can create real barriers to adopting digital tools. It's not just about resisting change; it's about holding on to a version of learning that's tied to memory.

This kind of resistance is understandable. After all, education systems have been built around certain norms and expectations. Teachers who have spent years in traditional classrooms may find it difficult to switch to online formats or digital platforms. And students, especially those who have always learned in brick-and-mortar settings, may also be wary of the shift to digital learning (Scholkmann, 2021). The problem here isn't necessarily the technology—it can be the memories that come with it. What we remember about how education used to be is often tied to feelings of comfort, security, and reliability. When we think about education, there's the role of *authority* and *power*. In traditional learning environments, teachers are seen as the central authority figures, guiding students through their learning journeys, and the classroom is the *lieu de mémoire* where knowledge is transmitted from teacher to student. But digital learning changes that dynamic. With online platforms and learning management systems, students are able to access information independently, often without a teacher's direct oversight. The technology here becomes 'an alternative source of authority in the classroom' (Puttick et al., 2015, p. 11). This disrupts the traditional power structures in education, and for many institutions and educators, it shakes their hold over the situation.

The impact of memory on authority is significant. For years, education has been about established *hierarchies* of knowledge: the teacher knows, and the student learns. Digital

learning flips that, with students having more control over their learning experiences, and this shift is unsettling for those who are attached to traditional ideas of what education should look like.

Disrupting traditional models of pedagogy

The digital shift in education represents a break from traditional pedagogies. In a traditional classroom, learning is often bound by time, space, and a fixed curriculum. But digital tools break these barriers, allowing for more flexible, personalised learning experiences. Platforms like Moodle, Zoom, and Google Classroom allow students to learn at their own pace, anytime and anywhere. This level of flexibility is a massive departure from the rigid structure of traditional classrooms—there is ‘a stronger emphasis on the *malleability* than on the *accessibility* of flexible education, particularly when it comes to the questions of *what* and *how* of learning’ (Bergene et al., 2023, p. 130). However, this disruption isn’t just about flexibility—it’s about redefining what learning can be. The way we remember education has been based on these fixed systems, but digital learning invites us to imagine a new future. If we navigate this transition with an awareness of how collective memory and the *sedimentation* of past educational practices influence our perceptions of learning, we can better understand how and why certain educational traditions persist or are challenged. ‘The power of sedimented memories lies precisely in the fact that they can easily be mobilised during such expedencies’ (Nedelcheva & Levy, 2022, p. 1183), allowing digital tools to reconfigure and expand learning environments in more inclusive, personalised, and innovative ways.

Figure 2

The thumbnail displayed in ‘What is Cultural Memory?’ by Turun yliopisto (University of Turku).



Note. In this video, Hanna Meretoja, Professor of Comparative Literature, introduces cultural memory as the collective practices societies use to connect with the past, live in the present, and envisage the future, highlighting how memory shapes our self-understanding and our ability to imagine and influence what lies ahead. https://youtu.be/hrECyLpL_gY?si=Tz3p42BuKM4mzghK

Memory and the future of learning

Looking ahead, this may be recognised as that digital learning has the potential to reshape the educational landscape. But as we move forward, we must consider how our memories of education—both the good and the bad—inform our visions of the future. Education is not just about technology; it's about how we remember the ways in which we have learned and how we wish to learn in the future. In many ways, our memories of the past are the lens through which we view digital learning today. Understanding how these memories influence our attitudes towards new technologies might help us navigate the future of education, and by acknowledging the role of memory in shaping the future of digital learning, we can create more inclusive, adaptable, and creative learning environments.

The memories we hold of traditional learning methods influence how we perceive new technologies, and in turn, how we adopt and adapt to them. While digital tools offer exciting possibilities for reshaping education, we must also be aware of the ways that collective memory can both resist and inspire these changes. By reflecting on the role of memory in education, we can reimagine a future where digital learning *coexists* with the traditions and values that have long shaped educational practices.

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