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Review Article

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Using Neuroplasticity in Teaching and Learning in Education: An Overview

Latifa Rahman*

Department of Administrative and Instructional Leadership, School of Education, St John's University, USA

***Corresponding Author**
Latifa Rahman, Department of Administrative and Instructional Leadership, School of Education, St John's University, USA.

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Abstract
This article evaluates the effects of neuroplasticity-based teaching and learning strategies on educational outcomes and long-term knowledge retention in comparison to traditional methods. It examines how neuroplasticity influences both formal and informal learning, resulting in adaptive changes in brain networks that support enduring and accessible knowledge. Neuroscience provides educators with critical insights into the brain's learning mechanisms, which may enhance student outcomes. This review applies a neuroscientific framework to demonstrate that educating students about their developing brains can promote both academic and personal growth by deepening their understanding of science and the humanities, expanding cognitive capacity, and strengthening identity.

Keywords: Neuroplasticity, Teaching, Learning, Educators, Education

1. Introduction

Neuroplasticity, defined as the brain's capacity to reorganize in response to experience, provides a foundational framework for understanding learning in cognitively demanding contexts. Approaches based on neuroplasticity recognize that cognitive load can either impede or facilitate learning, depending on how neural resources are allocated and how instructional environments are managed. Despite this, many educational practices fail to incorporate principles of neuroplasticity to optimize cognitive load, leading to significant learning inefficiencies across diverse populations. Empirical research indicates that approximately 67% of students experience cognitive overload in STEM disciplines, leading to decreased contribution, reduced retention, and limited knowledge transfer [1].

Understanding of neuroplasticity-informed learning under cognitive load is critical for advancing educational neuroscience and improving the design of learning environments, especially those that integrate technology. Traditional instructional models often rely on uniform strategies that overlook individual differences in cognitive processing, prior knowledge, and neuroplastic potential. This misalignment between instructional demands and learner capabilities hinders effective learning, particularly for neurodivergent students and individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds who may have distinct cognitive resources and processing styles. At the molecular level, neuroplasticity-informed learning investigates how cognitive load affects protein synthesis, neurotransmitter activity, and the expression of plasticity-related genes such as brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF). These molecular processes are highly responsive to cognitive challenges. Moderate cognitive demands promote adaptive neural changes, while excessive cognitive load can trigger stress responses that inhibit neuroplasticity [2].

Learning under high mental demand is essential for education, skill acquisition, and cognitive development. The link between cognitive challenge and learning outcomes is more complex than previously thought. Cognitive load refers to the mental effort and working memory needed to process information during learning. Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory identifies three main types: intrinsic cognitive load, determined by the material's difficulty and the learner's expertise; extraneous cognitive load, caused by unnecessary mental effort from poor instructional design or irrelevant information; and germane cognitive load, which is the productive effort devoted to building knowledge structures. Cognitive load arises from the brain's limited working memory, managed by prefrontal cortex networks, which typically hold only a few units of information [3].

Individual differences in cognitive structure and expertise lead to variability, with working memory spans ranging from three to nine units. (Jarrold & Towse, 2006,) When cognitive demand exceeds available neural resources, performance declines and neuroplasticity is reduced [4]. Educational interventions that leverage neuroplasticity must carefully manage this threshold to optimize learning outcomes.

Engaging with challenging content often causes fluctuations in learner performance due to cognitive overload. These changes appear both in behavior and as adaptive modifications in the brain's functional architecture, which can be addressed using strategies based on neuroplasticity [5]. A thorough understanding of cognitive load is essential in modern education, where complex, technology-driven environments can either support or hinder cognitive processing.

2. Overview

Neuroplasticity refers to the nervous system's capacity to adapt to internal and external changes by reorganizing its structure, functions, and connections throughout the lifespan. This adaptability challenges the traditional conception of the brain as a static organ. Neuroplasticity provides a biological basis for optimizing learning under varying cognitive loads. Over the past two decades, research has demonstrated that neural structures are shaped and reorganized by environmental stimuli and experiences [6]. Learning approaches grounded in neuroplasticity that utilize these mechanisms across the lifespan have shown efficacy [6].

Neuroplasticity operates across multiple hierarchical levels, each of which is essential for understanding learning under cognitive load. At the cellular level, processes such as synaptogenesis, neurogenesis in regions including the hippocampus, and dendritic remodeling occur in response to cognitive challenges. Empirical evidence demonstrates that appropriate cognitive load during learning can increase dendritic spine density by 20 to 40 percent within hours to days [7]. At the network level, reorganization of cortical maps and changes in functional connectivity between brain regions are observed, as shown by functional imaging during cognitive load manipulation. Diffusion tensor imaging studies reveal that intensive learning can modify white matter microstructure within weeks, while changes in functional connectivity may occur within minutes of training [8]. At the systems level, modifications in brain size, shape, cerebral laterality, and large-scale network organization demonstrate the brain's capacity for extensive adaptive reconfiguration in response to sustained cognitive demands.

The application of neuroplasticity in educational settings encompasses two primary strategies: educating students about neuroplasticity to promote a growth mindset and structuring classroom environments to support the development and reinforcement of neural pathways.

3. Neuroplasticity-Based Teaching Strategies

- Imagine lesson plans designed to spark long-lasting brain change by strengthening synapses through repeated, meaningful activity. Teachers can introduce fresh ideas, weave in multisensory experiences, space out review sessions, and even encourage restful sleep to help students lock in what they learn.
- *Spaced Repetition:* Instead of intensive cramming, key vocabulary and formulas should be reintroduced at progressively increasing intervals over several weeks.
- *Multisensory Modalities:* Multiple brain regions can be engaged by integrating tactile materials, visual diagrams, and rhythmic movement into instructional activities.
- *Achievable Challenge:* Tasks should remain within the "stretch zone" to ensure they are sufficiently challenging but not overwhelming. Excessive stress can trigger cortisol release, which inhibits neuroplasticity [2].
- *Active Retrieval:* Students should be encouraged to actively recall information rather than passively receive it. Low-stakes peer quizzes, flashcards, and student-led teaching can facilitate this process.
- *Emotional Anchoring:* Complex or abstract concepts should be introduced through engaging narratives. Emotional engagement facilitates dopamine release, which supports the encoding of information for long-term retention [9].

Neuroplasticity provides a direct connection between neuroscience and educational practice by demonstrating that learning physically alters the brain's structure and function. As the brain grows, prunes, and reorganizes its neural networks in response to experiential stimuli, educators can intentionally design learning environments to optimize this adaptive capacity.

4. Neuroplasticity and the Science of Learning

When students acquire new knowledge, neurons transmit electrical and chemical impulses across synapses. The effectiveness of this process relies on several key neurological mechanisms:

- *Long-Term Potentiation (LTP):* Repeated activation of specific neural pathways strengthens synaptic connections, thereby facilitating faster, more efficient signal transmission in the future [10].
- *Myelination:* Consistent practice stimulates the development of a myelin sheath around active axons, enhancing processing speeds necessary for complex skill acquisition [11].
- *Synaptic Pruning:* Neural connections that are not regularly reinforced deteriorate, reallocating cognitive resources to more frequently utilized pathways [12].
- *Chemical Modulators:* Attentive, highly motivated learning states trigger the release of dopamine and acetylcholine, thereby directly facilitating synaptic modifications [13].
- *Implications of Neuroplasticity for Instructional Design:* Given the brain's high degree of malleability, educators should replace passive teaching methods with strategies that promote physical structural changes in neural architecture: Engaging multiple senses, such as hearing, vision, and touch, activates various brain regions and strengthens neural connections. Real-world learning, unlike rote memorization, integrates new information with existing knowledge more effectively [14].
- *Spacing and Deliberate Practice:* Spaced repetition, which

involves revisiting concepts at increasing intervals, provides the repeated stimulation necessary to consolidate long-term memory [15].

- *Low-Stakes Retrieval:* Actively recalling information through testing, rather than simply rereading, compels the brain to reconstruct neural pathways and significantly strengthens memory retention [16].
- *Emotional and Physical Environment:* Stress Reduction: Elevated cortisol levels associated with stress inhibit neuroplasticity. In contrast, low-stress and safe environments maintain the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex in a state conducive to cognitive development [17].
- *Movement Breaks:* Incorporating rhythmic activities, light cardiovascular exercise, or intentional stretching enhances blood flow, increases oxygen delivery, and supports neurogenesis, which is the formation of new neurons [18].

Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to reorganize by forming new neural connections in response to experience and learning [19]. In education, this means intelligence is not fixed. With deliberate practice and targeted input, students can reshape their brains to overcome challenges and improve academic skills.

Educators can use neuroplasticity to create effective, evidence-based learning environments by applying the following strategies:

- *Promote a Growth Mindset:* Educators should explicitly instruct students about neuroplasticity. When students recognize that errors and sustained practice can alter their neural pathways, they are more likely to develop perseverance, motivation, and intrinsic interest in learning [20].
- *Balance Challenge and Support:* Neuroplasticity is optimized when students operate within the "stretch zone," as identified by psychologists [21].Tasks should present appropriate challenges while providing sufficient scaffolding to facilitate success and prevent disengagement.
- *Incorporate Repetition and Retrieval:* Repeated, targeted practice reinforces synaptic connections [22]. Active learning strategies, including spaced repetition and end-of-class summaries, facilitate the transfer of concepts from working memory to long-term memory [23].
- *Reduce Stress and Foster Positivity:* Elevated stress levels trigger the release of cortisol, which inhibits synaptic plasticity [24]. Establishing a safe and emotionally supportive environment through mindfulness and engagement can increase dopamine levels and enhance learning outcomes [25].
- *Engage Multiple Senses:* Integrating language with music, rhythm, movement, or visual aids activates multiple brain regions and strengthens the neural encoding of information [26].

5. Integrating Neuroplasticity into Educational Curricula

Instruction on experience-based neuroplasticity and the dynamic changes in neuronal networks during learning demonstrates the inherent and robust capacity for cognitive development. Furthermore, explicitly connecting neuroplasticity to the growth mindset and developmental processes establishes a motivating premise for learners: learning potential is dynamic and significantly influenced by attitudes and learning practices.

The neuroplasticity principles of “use it or lose it” and “use it to improve it” indicate that, although teachers provide support, students retain primary responsibility for their own learning. This perspective can foster greater responsibility and ownership among students.

Using neuroplasticity and a growth mindset to motivate students is especially important for neurodivergent learners, whose cognitive development and learning styles differ from typical patterns. About twenty percent of the population is neurodivergent, including individuals on the autism spectrum (ASD), those with learning disabilities, attention disorders such as ADHD, neurological disorders such as epilepsy, and mental illness [27]. While neurodiversity offers many advantages, neurodivergent students often face additional challenges in school systems designed for neurotypical learners. Teaching about neuroplasticity can validate neurodivergent students, as neurodiversity naturally results from experience-dependent neuroplasticity. Promoting a growth mindset and neuroplasticity awareness can also encourage engagement in evidence-based interventions. For example, informing students with dyslexia about the brain changes linked to reading interventions can motivate persistence before results are visible [28].

6. Applying Neuroplasticity Principles to Educational System Design

Educational environments that support neuroplasticity promote healthy lifestyles, including physical activity, balanced nutrition, adequate sleep, and effective stress management. For example, educating students about the detrimental effects of sleep deprivation, such as those associated with “all-nighter” study sessions, can enhance learning outcomes. Learning systems should also provide intellectual stimulation through novelty and challenge, while fostering a positive social and emotional climate. Neuroplasticity and development are optimized when learners encounter motivating challenges in emotionally supportive and socially secure settings. The balance between support and challenge should be individualized and adjusted as necessary.

Providing teachers with education on neuroplasticity can enhance their capacity to support students affected by trauma. Childhood adversity diminishes both the duration and extent of neuroplasticity, as a brain oriented toward survival is less capable of learning [29]. Although early trauma impairs neuroplasticity, it also presents opportunities for recovery [30]. Schools play a critical role in addressing early trauma by establishing enriched and safe learning environments that reinforce alternative neuronal pathways and help mitigate the negative effects of adverse childhood experiences on brain development [31].

7. Discussion and Conclusion

Neuroplasticity-based pedagogical strategies improve academic performance, motivation, and soft skills among university students [32]. Compared to traditional methods, these approaches strengthen knowledge retention, support personalized learning, and address individual differences (Bigio et al., 2023; Kozlowska et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2023). These advantages stem from the brain's ability to reorganize in response to targeted stimuli, which facilitates the development of cognitive and socioemotional skills (Shang & Bieszczad, 2022; Sumner et al., 2021; Tsay & Winstein, 2021).

Neuroplastic pedagogical strategies positively influence student motivation and engagement. Active interaction and technological tools, including virtual reality and gamification, promote curiosity and creativity, leading to a stronger connection with academic content (Gomutbutra et al., 2022; Marfia et al., 2022; Tsay & Winstein, 2021). In contrast, traditional methods are often rigid, which can decrease motivation and participation (McEwen & Akil, 2020; Lehmann et al., 2021).

Neuroplastic pedagogical strategies further contribute to the development of soft skills critical to workforce integration. Approaches emphasizing collaborative learning and problem-solving enhance communication, resilience, and leadership, thereby improving students' professional readiness (Berns et al., 2020; Fair & Yeo, 2020; Wang et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the implementation of these strategies is challenged by institutional resistance, insufficient teacher training in applied neuroscience, and inadequate technological infrastructure (Bennett et al., 2020; Goldberg, 2022; Lee et al., 2023).

Traditionally, students have chosen between the humanities and the sciences. Increasingly, academic institutions are adopting integrative approaches. Multidisciplinary studies report positive outcomes for learning and professional development [33].Teaching neuroscience from both scientific and humanistic perspectives provides a substantive connection between these disciplines [34]. Studying neuroscience with explicit connections to real-life brain development and behavior can be academically and personally transformative for students [35]. Neuroscience offers insights into critical issues affecting adolescents and young adults, such as selective and leaky attention, the reward system and addiction, developmental mismatches between the prefrontal cortex and limbic system, neurodiversity and inclusion, emotion regulation, and mental health [36].

Incorporating a personal dimension into neuroscience studies highlights the importance of personal relevance for motivation. Teaching neuroscience from both scientific and personal perspectives, and connecting this knowledge to self-understanding, can increase engagement and foster enthusiasm for science [37]. This approach enables students to integrate and apply scientific knowledge across diverse contexts. Comparable to physical education, educational neuroscience can promote awareness of brain health and encourage students to adopt a purposeful approach to their education and development.

Brain-friendly teaching utilizes principles that align with the brain's processes of encoding, consolidating, and retrieving information. Educational neuroscience underscores the need for a holistic approach that integrates cognitive, emotional, and social factors. Supporting physical health, offering cognitive challenges, and ensuring emotional safety collectively foster an environment conducive to neuroplasticity and learning. Assessing learning progress, rather than focusing exclusively on final outcomes, encourages students to move beyond memorization toward lasting, meaningful learning. Instructional designs that promote experimentation, exploration, risk-taking, and learning from mistakes without grade penalties further support this process [38]. Educating students about their developing brains can enhance both academic and personal growth by deepening their understanding of science and the humanities, expanding cognitive capacity, and strengthening identity. Educational neuroscience offers significant potential for teaching students about their brains and supporting lifelong learning through brain-friendly methods [39-41].

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