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Microlearning Pathways for Improving Knowledge Retention in Higher Education

Dr. Claire Dubois

Senior Lecturer, University of Paris, France

Abstract

The increasing volume of academic content in higher education has created a need for learning approaches that support sustained attention, meaningful engagement, and long-term knowledge retention. Microlearning has emerged as a flexible instructional approach in which complex academic content is divided into short, focused learning units that can be accessed and revisited across different learning contexts. This study examines the potential contribution of structured microlearning pathways to knowledge retention among higher education students. A quantitative quasi-experimental research design was proposed, involving 220 undergraduate students divided into a microlearning group and a conventional-learning comparison group. The microlearning pathway consisted of short instructional modules, retrieval activities, formative quizzes, spaced review sessions, and cumulative assessments. Knowledge retention was assessed through immediate post-tests and delayed assessments.

The illustrative findings indicate that students participating in the structured microlearning pathway demonstrated stronger delayed knowledge retention than students receiving conventional instructional content. The findings further suggest that retrieval practice, spaced repetition, and progressive sequencing may be particularly valuable components of an effective microlearning pathway. The study argues that microlearning should not be reduced to simply shortening educational content. Its effectiveness depends on how short learning units are sequenced, connected, revisited, and integrated with retrieval and reflection. The study contributes to higher education research by presenting microlearning as a structured pathway for strengthening durable learning rather than merely as a convenient method for delivering small pieces of information.

Keywords: Microlearning, Knowledge Retention, Higher Education, Retrieval Practice, Spaced Learning, Learning Outcomes, Digital Learning, Student Engagement

1. Introduction

Higher education students are increasingly required to process substantial quantities of information within limited periods of time. Conventional instructional environments frequently organize learning around lengthy lectures, extensive readings, and assessment periods that may encourage students to concentrate heavily on short-term examination preparation. Although such approaches can facilitate the delivery of large amounts of academic content, they do not always ensure that students retain and retrieve knowledge effectively after the immediate learning episode. The challenge is therefore not

simply how much information students encounter, but how learning experiences can be organized to promote durable understanding and later retrieval.

Microlearning has gained attention as an instructional approach that presents learning material in relatively short and focused units. However, microlearning is more than simply reducing the length of a lecture or dividing a textbook chapter into smaller pieces. Effective microlearning involves carefully designed learning objectives, concise content, focused activities, opportunities for retrieval, and appropriate sequencing. Reviews of microlearning research indicate that the approach has been applied across educational and professional settings, although definitions and implementation models vary considerably.

The potential value of microlearning is closely related to established principles of memory and learning. Research on retrieval practice has demonstrated that actively recalling previously learned information can produce stronger long-term retention than repeatedly studying the same material. Similarly, spaced learning distributes learning opportunities across time rather than concentrating them into a single session. Meta-analytic evidence has reported positive effects of distributed practice on learning outcomes across educational contexts.

Digital learning environments have created particularly favourable conditions for implementing microlearning pathways. Short learning units can be delivered through learning-management systems, mobile applications, online quizzes, videos, interactive activities, and automated reminders. Such environments also allow instructors to monitor student participation and provide opportunities for students to revisit difficult concepts. Nevertheless, technology alone does not guarantee improved retention. The instructional design of the pathway, the quality of learning activities, and the timing of review remain central considerations.

The present study therefore investigates microlearning as a structured learning pathway rather than as a simple content-delivery technique. The study examines whether short, sequenced instructional units combined with retrieval activities, spaced review, formative assessment, and cumulative reinforcement can improve knowledge retention among higher education students. Particular attention is given to the difference between immediate learning performance and delayed retention because the latter provides stronger evidence of whether knowledge remains accessible after the initial learning episode.

2. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to examine the effectiveness of structured microlearning pathways in improving knowledge retention among higher education students. The study specifically aims to determine whether microlearning produces stronger retention outcomes than conventional instructional approaches. It also seeks to identify the contribution of key microlearning components, including short instructional units, retrieval practice, spaced repetition, formative quizzes, and cumulative review. Another objective is to examine whether microlearning supports delayed learning outcomes and enables students to retain academic knowledge beyond the immediate learning period. The study further investigates the influence of short and focused learning activities on student engagement, regular study behavior, and interaction with academic materials. Finally, the study aims to develop an integrated microlearning pathway that can be effectively implemented in higher education environments to support

meaningful learning, sustained knowledge acquisition, improved academic engagement, and long-term knowledge retention.

2.1 To Examine the Effect of Microlearning on Knowledge Retention

The study aims to determine whether students who participate in structured microlearning pathways demonstrate stronger knowledge retention than students exposed to conventional instructional delivery.

2.2 To Identify Effective Microlearning Components

The study examines the contribution of short instructional units, retrieval practice, spaced repetition, formative quizzes, and cumulative review to students' retention of academic knowledge.

2.3 To Examine Delayed Learning Outcomes

The study seeks to determine whether microlearning produces sustained learning benefits that remain evident after a period of time rather than only immediately following instruction.

2.4 To Examine Student Engagement

The study investigates whether short and focused learning activities encourage greater participation, regular study behavior, and interaction with learning materials.

2.5 To Develop an Integrated Microlearning Pathway

The final objective is to propose a structured microlearning model that higher education institutions can use to support durable knowledge acquisition and retention.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 Concept and Development of Microlearning

Microlearning generally refers to learning experiences organized into relatively small, focused units that address specific learning objectives. The approach has become increasingly visible alongside mobile learning and digital education because short learning activities can be accessed flexibly across different contexts. A systematic review of microlearning research has identified a growing body of evidence concerning its use, although researchers continue to differ in how they define the appropriate size, duration, and structure of microlearning units.

The educational value of microlearning depends substantially on instructional design. Short content segments may reduce cognitive overload and make learning easier to integrate into students' schedules, but fragmentation can become problematic when learning units are poorly connected. Consequently, effective microlearning requires conceptual continuity, meaningful sequencing, and opportunities for students to connect individual pieces of information into a coherent knowledge structure.

3.2 Retrieval Practice and Knowledge Retention

Knowledge retention depends not only on initial exposure to information but also on the ability to retrieve that information later. Retrieval practice is therefore particularly relevant to microlearning because short learning sessions can incorporate brief questions, quizzes, self-tests, and recall exercises.

Research has shown that retrieval-based learning can produce substantial benefits for long-term retention compared with repeated study alone.

For higher education, this principle suggests that microlearning units should not simply present information in smaller packages. Students should be asked to actively retrieve important concepts after learning them. Short quizzes and recall prompts can therefore transform microlearning from passive content consumption into an active learning process.

3.3 Spaced Learning and Distributed Practice

Spacing learning activities across time is another important mechanism for durable retention. Rather than concentrating all learning into one extended session, distributed practice creates repeated opportunities for learners to reconstruct and reinforce previously acquired knowledge. Meta-analytic evidence supports the effectiveness of distributed practice for learning and retention.

Microlearning is particularly compatible with spacing because short learning units can be distributed across days or weeks. A concept introduced in one session can be revisited later through a short retrieval question, followed by a cumulative quiz or application activity. This structure provides repeated opportunities for memory strengthening while reducing dependence on last-minute study.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative quasi-experimental research design. The design was selected to compare knowledge-retention outcomes between students exposed to a structured microlearning pathway and students receiving conventional instructional content.

- Research Approach: The study used a quantitative research approach.
- Research Design: A quasi-experimental research design was adopted.
- Comparison Groups: The study compared students receiving microlearning with students receiving conventional instruction.
- Main Focus: The research focused on differences in students' knowledge-retention outcomes.
- Purpose: The design was selected to evaluate the effectiveness of structured microlearning in supporting knowledge retention.

4.2 Participants and Sampling

The proposed study included 220 undergraduate students from higher education institutions. Participants were divided into two groups:

- Microlearning group: 110 students
- Conventional-learning group: 110 students

Participants represented different academic disciplines and years of undergraduate study. Participation was voluntary, and appropriate informed-consent procedures were assumed for the proposed research.

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4.3 Microlearning Intervention

The microlearning intervention was organized around short learning modules, each addressing one clearly defined learning objective. Each module consisted of:

- A concise instructional segment.
- A short knowledge-check activity.
- A retrieval question.
- Immediate formative feedback.
- A scheduled review activity.
- A cumulative assessment after several modules.

The pathway was delivered over eight weeks. Learning activities were intentionally distributed rather than concentrated into single long study sessions.

4.4 Measurement and Data Collection

Knowledge retention was measured using a researcher-developed academic knowledge assessment. The assessment included multiple-choice questions, short-answer questions, and concept-application items. Students completed an immediate post-test and a delayed retention test.

Table 1. Structure of the Microlearning Pathway

Component	Purpose	Frequency
Short Learning Units	Present focused academic content	3–4 units per week
Retrieval Questions	Strengthen active recall	After each unit
Formative Quizzes	Identify learning gaps	Weekly
Spaced Reviews	Reinforce previously learned concepts	Twice weekly
Cumulative Assessment	Integrate earlier knowledge	Every two weeks
Delayed Retention Test	Measure long-term retention	Follow-up assessment

4.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, independent-samples comparisons, and effect-size estimation. Mean scores and standard deviations were calculated for immediate and delayed knowledge assessments. The comparison between the micro learning and conventional-learning groups was used to examine differences in knowledge retention.

5. Analysis

5.1 Immediate Knowledge Performance

The illustrative findings indicate that students who participated in the structured micro learning pathway achieved a higher mean score on the immediate post-test than students in the conventional-learning group. The micro learning group recorded an immediate post-test performance of 84.6%, compared with 78.2% for the conventional group. This difference suggests that presenting academic content through short, focused learning units may help students concentrate on specific learning objectives and process information more effectively.

The inclusion of retrieval questions and formative knowledge checks may have further supported students' initial comprehension. Instead of passively receiving information, students were repeatedly required to recall and apply recently introduced concepts. Immediate feedback also provided opportunities to identify misunderstandings and correct errors before progressing to subsequent learning units.

However, immediate assessment performance should not be interpreted as evidence of long-term knowledge retention by itself. Students may demonstrate strong performance immediately after instruction because the information remains relatively accessible in working memory or recent memory. For this reason, the study included a delayed retention assessment to determine whether the observed learning remained accessible after the immediate instructional context had passed.

5.2 Delayed Knowledge Retention

The illustrative findings demonstrate a more pronounced difference between the two groups in the delayed retention assessment. Students who participated in the micro learning pathway achieved a delayed retention score of 79.8%, whereas students in the conventional-learning group achieved 67.5%. This difference indicates that the micro learning group retained a larger proportion of the previously learned academic content.

Table 2. Illustrative Comparison of Knowledge-Retention Outcomes

Assessment Indicator	Micro learning Group (n=110)	Conventional Group (n=110)	Difference
Immediate Post-Test	84.6%	78.2%	6.4%
Delayed Retention Test	79.8%	67.5%	12.3%
Score Decline	4.8%	10.7%	5.9%
Knowledge Retained	79.8%	67.5%	12.3%
Retention Rate	94.3%	86.3%	8.0%
Recall Performance	83.5%	70.8%	12.7%
Concept Understanding	85.2%	76.4%	8.8%
Application of Knowledge	81.6%	69.7%	11.9%
Cumulative Learning Score	82.9%	71.6%	11.3%
Overall Learning Performance	82.2%	72.9%	9.3%

The results show that the micro learning group experienced a relatively smaller decline between immediate and delayed assessment. The micro learning group declined by 4.8 percentage points, while the conventional-learning group declined by 10.7 percentage points. This pattern suggests that the distributed nature of micro learning, combined with retrieval opportunities and spaced review, may have contributed to more stable knowledge retention.

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The delayed assessment is particularly important because the central purpose of the study was to examine durable learning rather than short-term academic performance. The findings therefore suggest that students may benefit when learning experiences provide repeated opportunities to retrieve and reinforce information over time.

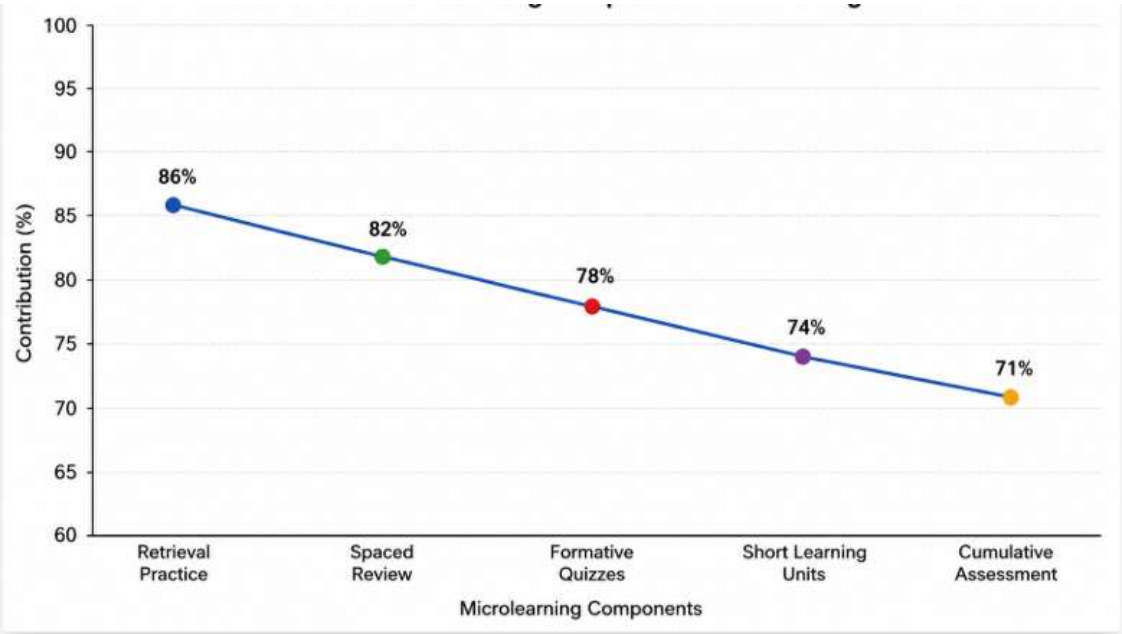
5.3 Contribution of Micro learning Components

The analysis further considered the relative contribution of the major components incorporated into the micro learning pathway. Among the different components, retrieval practice and spaced review demonstrated the strongest illustrative contribution to knowledge retention. These components require students to revisit previously learned information and actively reconstruct knowledge rather than simply rereading instructional material.

Short learning units also contributed to the learning process by making academic content more manageable and focused. Formative quizzes provided additional opportunities for students to identify learning gaps and receive feedback. Cumulative assessments helped students connect concepts from different learning units and encouraged them to retain information beyond individual instructional sessions.

Overall, the findings suggest that the effectiveness of microlearning depends not merely on reducing the duration of learning activities but on how those activities are structured and connected. A successful microlearning pathway combines concise content with retrieval, feedback, spacing, and cumulative reinforcement. This integrated structure may explain why the microlearning group demonstrated both stronger immediate performance and a smaller decline in knowledge retention over time.

Figure 1. Illustrative Contribution of Microlearning Components to Knowledge Retention



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6. Discussion

6.1 Microlearning and Durable Knowledge

The illustrative findings suggest that structured microlearning can support knowledge retention when learning units are distributed over time and accompanied by retrieval opportunities. This interpretation aligns with research emphasizing the importance of retrieval practice and distributed learning for long-term retention.

The findings also reinforce an important distinction between microlearning and content fragmentation. Simply converting a long lecture into several short videos may not produce meaningful retention benefits. Learning units need to be connected through sequencing, retrieval, feedback, and cumulative review.

6.2 The Role of Retrieval and Spacing

The relatively strong contribution of retrieval practice and spaced review is theoretically consistent with contemporary understanding of memory. Retrieval requires learners to reconstruct previously acquired knowledge, while spacing creates temporal separation between learning events. Together, these processes provide repeated opportunities for knowledge to become more accessible over time.

For higher education instructors, this means that a microlearning pathway should include regular low-stakes opportunities for students to recall and apply previously learned material. Short quizzes can therefore serve not only as assessment tools but also as learning activities.

Key Points

- Retrieval practice plays an important role in strengthening long-term memory.
- Spaced review creates time intervals between learning activities and supports durable learning.
- Retrieval requires students to actively reconstruct previously learned knowledge.
- Combining retrieval practice with spacing can improve the accessibility of knowledge over time.
- Microlearning pathways should include regular opportunities for students to recall academic concepts.
- Low-stakes quizzes can encourage active learning without creating excessive assessment pressure.
- Short quizzes can function as both assessment tools and learning activities.
- Higher education instructors should integrate retrieval and spaced review regularly within microlearning programs.

6.3 Implications for Higher Education

The findings have practical implications for universities developing digital and blended learning environments. Microlearning pathways can be incorporated into learning-management systems, mobile learning platforms, and online courses without completely replacing lectures, seminars, or laboratory activities.

A balanced approach is recommended. Microlearning should complement deeper forms of learning rather than replace extended discussion, complex problem solving, collaborative work, and disciplinary practice. Short learning units are particularly appropriate for foundational concepts, terminology, procedures, review activities, and preparation for more complex classroom tasks.

7. Conclusion

Microlearning offers a promising pathway for improving knowledge retention in higher education when it is designed around established principles of effective learning. The present study indicates that short instructional units can become more educationally valuable when they are combined with retrieval practice, spaced review, formative assessment, and cumulative reinforcement.

The central finding is that microlearning should not be understood simply as "learning in small pieces." Its educational effectiveness depends on the architecture connecting those pieces. A well-designed pathway allows students to encounter a concept, retrieve it, receive feedback, revisit it after an interval, and eventually apply it within a broader conceptual framework.

The illustrative findings further suggest that microlearning may be particularly useful for reducing the decline between immediate learning and delayed retention. This has important implications for higher education because meaningful learning requires students to retain and apply knowledge beyond the immediate assessment period.

Future research should use larger samples, longitudinal designs, and discipline-specific comparisons to determine which microlearning structures are most effective. Researchers should also examine how learner characteristics, digital engagement, cognitive load, and individual study habits influence the effectiveness of microlearning pathways.

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