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The Method of Loci: A Survey Review

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Abstract

The method of loci (MoL), or memory palace technique, is a classical mnemonic in which information is encoded as images placed along an ordered sequence of familiar locations. Relevant studies were identified through targeted searches of Google Scholar using broad terms such as “method of loci,” “memory palace,” “spatial mnemonics,” and related keywords. This paper reviews MoL across historical origins, cognitive mechanisms, neural pathways, clinical applications, virtual and mixed reality implementations, and educational applications. Sources were selected primarily from peer-reviewed journal articles, with additional studies located through reference lists of key papers and prior reviews on mnemonic techniques and spatial memory. Mechanistically, evidence indicates that MoL effectiveness depends on explicit binding between items and spatial loci, rich visual imagery consistent with dual-coding accounts, and context reinstatement during retrieval. Familiar environments further strengthen encoding through self-referential and autobiographical pathways. Neuroimaging findings suggest that superior performance reflects strategy-driven functional reorganization rather than brain enlargement. Novices show greater reliance on frontal executive control regions while memory experts shift toward a posterior navigation. Clinical evidence varies by population: results are most consistent in depression and mild cognitive impairment/early dementia. Early feasibility work in ADHD indicates MoL can be engaging and may improve memory and symptoms, but adherence challenges remain. Clinical evidence in the efficacy of schizophrenia is little and does not currently seem favorable. Across studies of virtual memory palaces, immersive systems sometimes improve recall, confidence, or engagement relative to desktop or no-strategy controls, but advantages over traditional MoL are inconsistent and appear sensitive to training time, environmental cue familiarity, user VR experience, and cognitive load. Educational studies suggest benefits for vocabulary, grammar, and mathematical learning, though classroom usage is constrained by the effort required to learn the technique. Because the literature spans diverse populations, experimental designs, and technological implementations, conclusions should be interpreted with awareness of variation in study methods, training duration, and sample sizes.

Keywords: method of loci, memory palace, memory technique, mnemonic, clinical application, virtual reality, survey review