

4.1 Personalise and connect learning: Build on learners' understandings



Essence >

The teacher identifies students' prior knowledge and cultural practices as a starting point for curriculum.

Begin with what we know

Several years ago I attended a 'Teaching about Other Places' workshop at the Global Education Centre (SA). The focus on concept-driven learning resonated with me. This was an approach I really wanted to explore with my students.

Back in the classroom, I thought about how they would respond best to the new challenge. I gathered some basic resources: an unmarked world wall map and the ever-popular 'sticky notes'. The initial task was an open invitation: 'How many countries can you think of? Write each one on a sticky note and then put it where you think it belongs on the world map'.

That captured their imagination. Sticky notes were being stripped frenetically, dialogue was animated, and the map filled rapidly with a patchwork of place names—countries, continents, states, regions and cities.

Then the debate began. Which ones were countries and which weren't? Their knowledge was impressive, but already they were realising how much they didn't know. I was able to draw out their misconceptions.

Rather than send the students straight to a definitive source for answers, I asked them to form small groups. Providing only one

sticky note per group, I posed the questions, 'What is a country? Can you give it your own definition?'.

Discussions were intense, reflective and purposeful. The students were constructing their own conceptual understandings. We compared definitions and questioned, clarified and refined each other's thinking. Sticky notes were juggled around, rewritten, moved or removed altogether. That school term, the world map was the focal point.

We went on to create our own 'countries', exploring general concepts of world geography, exploration and migration, citizenship and cultural identity, government, economic growth and tourism. With each deeper understanding, students were ready to make links to new, explicit learning about the world. We had laid the foundation for a rigorous learning journey.

Over the years I've introduced 'Learning about Other Places' to three different classes, and each group has brought to the task its own unique perspectives and dimensions. Each time the journey has been a new one—it's always different because they are different.

Country primary school teacher