

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

Key actions: Teachers

- Value prior knowledge as fundamental to new learning, seek out what the students already know, can do and understand, and use this to inform planning
- Approach a new topic openly with students, discussing why we need to explore it, how we will share the learning and how we might use it in the future
- Capture and record these initial responses as a starting point for mapping the shared learning journey
- Ensure that all ideas are acknowledged, misconceptions explored and deliberate guidance towards accuracy provided
- Pose guiding questions and listen closely to each student's response, to elicit understanding
- Support learners to identify and clear up basic misunderstandings
- Find hooks to create student interest and meaning making by responding to students' energies and enthusiasm
- Deepen students' curiosity by linking new meanings to what they already know, and discuss how each of us may see these links in our own unique way
- Challenge students to question what they don't know
- Use visualisation, mind mapping and concept maps to capture students' thinking
- Help learners to build on each other's understandings by teaching the skills of reflective listening, paraphrasing and questioning
- Teach skills that enable students to show their understanding in a range of ways such as writing, artwork, practical tasks, roleplays and multimedia presentations
- Design learning challenges that are open and stimulate further questions
- Develop processes for students' active, ongoing reflection (eg where they have come from, what they now know, and where their new learning will lead)

Key actions: Students

- Talk with my friends and teachers about what I already know and what I need to know next
- Record what I know and understand by writing, drawing or other ways that show it best
- Use technology to talk with others beyond the class
- Ask questions to help me understand better
- Think about how my new learning connects to my family and my life
- Listen to other people's ideas and compare them with mine

... the challenge for educators is to help individuals construct, for themselves, the understandings that other minds have discovered before them. Left to chance, or open discovery, my belief is that you would have to be Einstein, or Einstein-like, to discover what he discovered.

Julia Atkin

Justice alert

Whose prior knowledge and cultural practices are seen as valid for building upon?

Ways to build on learners' understandings

Graphic organisers: Use visual ways to connect with what students already know and understand, so that misconceptions can be explored. Examples are:

- Mind Maps
- Lotus Diagrams
- KWS (what I Know, Want to learn, and possible Sources).

Graphic organisers can be sourced from <www.teachervision.fen.com/graphicorganizers/printable/6293> and <www.educationoasis.com/curriculum/graphic_organizers>.

▶ Reflection partners: Students work with a partner to reflect on their learning. Useful starters are: 'I know what I'm learning about because ...', 'I could use this learning elsewhere by ...', 'This is my understanding ... This is how I got to it ...', 'I came to this conclusion because ...', 'I heard you say ... Is this what you meant ...?'.

▶ Correlation chart: This chart can be used for evaluating relationships between factors through looking at responses from a group and showing areas of agreement and difference. On a graph, the axes represent the two factors and each axis has a continuum. For example, when reviewing a task or new topic:

- X axis—'what I learnt' with a continuum of *nothing, something, quite a lot, heaps*
- Y axis—'how useful it will be for me' with a continuum of *not at all, quite useful, very useful, extremely useful*.

Students stick a coloured dot at the point that captures their own response. The results can inform further learning and planning.

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build on learners' understandings

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