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Battling Inert Knowledge with the Right Questions

In his 1989 paper, Bransford discusses a variety of topics related to education and knowledge. One of the most prominent points brought up is the concept of inert knowledge which "is accessed only in a restricted set of contexts even through it is applicable to a wide variety of domains" (Bransford 472). The phenomenon has become a more widely recognized problem with students entering the workforce in recent decades and their inability to bring previous education to new contexts. In an excerpt on mathematical education, Febrian Febz dives deep into the ideology of combating inert knowledge by leading students to the right questions.

Febz opens the idea of questions by describing the difference between "what" and "when or why" (Febz 19). In his analysis of mathematics education, he had observed that traditional instruction has revolved around years of matriculating formulas that gradually build on each other. Lines lead to shapes, shapes lead to geometry, geometry leads to dimension studies, and the list continues. The problem of inert knowledge is born in the gaps that exist between these branches when students ask, "what comes next?". The instructor should instead attempt to drive students to ask, "why are we here" or "why are we doing this" in classes. Some educators find the idea of "why" to be demeaning, but studies have shown that openness to such questions allows for the building of the foundation behind each step and allows for a level of learning that has been shown to exponentially increase recall in new situations.

The problem of inert knowledge has become engrained in our society. In the light of recent studies, it has become apparent that in order to combat this issue, educators should look to enlighten their students on the reasoning and origins of the current state, rather than keep building on completely unlearned topics.