

Helping students make connections to their prior learning, to books or other media, or to experiences they have had in their life, helps them to build the cognitive schema that lets them advance.

I had been teaching Grade 8 for several years in a large city before I moved to a Grade 4 classroom in a rural area. It was difficult to adjust my thinking to this grade because the students were so curious about the topics and their personal experiences were different from my “city” students. For example, when we studied bears, the subject moved to include climate, vegetation, population growth, and environmental concerns about dumps. Because bears were part of the everyday life of these students, they wanted to know so much more. To me the student inquiry was more important than a lot of facts about bears. When I followed their lead, I think they actually learned more and retained more about bears by relating it to other ideas.

Angie

Angie was experiencing students who were using their tacit knowledge to aid their understanding and gain explicit knowledge of a particular subject. If questioned, the students might not be able to articulate how they came up with the connections they made to other topics. It is important that Angie did not try to reign-in the learning process by sticking to specifics about bears. Helping students make connections to their prior learning, to books or other media, or to experiences they have had in their life, helps them to build the cognitive schema that lets them advance.

Knowledge Resources

When faced with a teaching topic where the knowledge component is not familiar to teachers, resource choice is important. With the rapid increase in new knowledge, it is not possible to be an expert in every subject area. However, it is important to choose reliable resources and have ways to check knowledge accuracy.

While they may be pressured for time in a new teaching situation, teachers need to consider:

- drawing upon curriculum experts for ideas
- using an inquiry approach to learning that puts the student at the center of the learning task
- researching local experts on a topic for field trip or guest speaker opportunities
- accessing subject specific web sites for teaching/learning ideas
- using the best resources acquired from previous teaching experiences (e.g., graphic organizers, reporting comments, checklists for tasks, rubrics)
- making use of the school librarian to help plan resources for specific topics.

Reaching a comfort level with new knowledge and having access to effective resources is an important first step to gaining confidence in a new teaching situation. Taking charge of the knowledge component is one area that teachers can control. It is within the walls of the classroom that effective teachers have the greatest opportunity to improve student achievement.

Other factors in school life can be a cause for concern and they are elements of the teaching profession that are, for the most part, out of the control of classroom teachers. Effective teachers learn ways to minimize the impact of the task pressures that come from outside the classroom. The following section addresses task concerns that are often outside of the control of classroom teachers.

Specific Task Concerns

Teachers concern themselves with planning effective lessons for their students. However, there are parts of teaching that compete for the planning time teachers need. In many cases, these concerns take time and energy away from the task of teaching. The concerns that get in the way of effective teaching are:

- time constraints
- the add-on of non-instructional duties
- the parameters of school organization.

Time Constraints

It is fair to say that almost any job associated with the teaching profession could take 24 hours a day and seven days a week because there is always:

- something new to learn
- more preparation that could be done for upcoming lessons
- more time that could be spent with each student
- additional books to read on important aspects of teaching
- research that can be done on what is working most effectively in the classroom.

Especially in new teaching situations, it is common to feel that there is little time available to do a quality job. Much like creating a budget for monetary resources, it is important to create a time-budget.

To address a time concern, begin by finding out where the time goes. Keep a simple time-diary (see the following).

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