

Making Connections

Connecting Prior Knowledge

Dewey. Piaget. Vygotsky. Bruner. These are just a few of the most renowned educational theorists and cognitive psychologists of the modern era who agree that children learn through making connections to their own prior knowledge. I believe that the brain works through the recognition of patterns that occur both within and outside of ourselves. The ability to relate what we experience through sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell to what we have already experienced is the foundation of all learning. For this reason, assessing students' prior knowledge and using that knowledge to inform instruction is a key element in initiating successful connections. Realizing that students make these connections through the perspective of their own unique strengths and intelligences will prompt me to present a variety of lessons and assessments to support each student's learning.

Connecting Content

With the understanding that time is the most valuable asset in the teaching world, I realize that I need to make every moment of instructional time count. I believe that this is best accomplished through integration of content areas. Where some content areas seem to relate naturally, others can be connected through the use of themes and "big questions." These connections between content should not be fabricated, rather they should authentically represent connections that occur in the real world. It is through these thematic ties and content integration that students learn to transfer both information and strategies between content areas and relate them to their own personal experiences.

Connecting With Others

Before students can benefit from the connections forged in the classroom between prior knowledge and content, they must be encouraged to connect with the teacher and with each other. Creating and maintaining a classroom environment where these relationships can develop is of primary importance at the beginning and throughout each school year. I believe that balancing classroom management with student involvement and input helps to create a sense of community. When students believe that they are free from unnecessary sarcasm and mockery from fellow students *and* the teacher, they can become a fully engaged participant in their own learning experience. Students, who see their teacher and peers not as adversaries, but as teammates, can make the interpersonal connections necessary for a comfortable and successful learning experience.

Connecting to the World Around Us

Students are never too young to see that they are part of a larger community. Whether their experience is through school, a sports team, or scout troop, they are interacting with a potentially diverse circle of people. As this circle grows, children see their potential to affect their immediate community or even the world at large. As a teacher, I believe that one of my mandates is to help young people understand that they are not bystanders, but active participants in the world around them.

Technology continues to make this global community smaller and vastly more connected than ever before. By actively engaging students in the classroom and school communities, students will begin to learn how to exist in and interact with the world.

Understanding the bond between their own prior knowledge, the content learned in school, the relationships formed in the classroom, and the recognition of community will help students realize their connection to the greater world around them.