

Building Bridges: Forming Knowledge through Experience

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“Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I'll understand.”

~Chinese Proverb

Classrooms all across our land contain a diverse student population. This is a well-known fact. A major characteristic that creates such a disparity among students is that of acquired background knowledge. One student may have had many experiences involving a wide range of subject matter, while another may have had very limited access to such avenues for learning. Research has proven that what students already know about the content is one of the strongest indicators of how well they will learn new information relative to the content. Numerous studies have confirmed the relationship between background knowledge and achievement. Student success depends upon building bridges from personal background knowledge and using prior learning experiences to make connections to concepts being taught in the classroom.

From children to adults, everyday experiences add to each individual's background knowledge. The more involved in the experience as an active participant, the more learning that takes place. Let's say a student's father operates a construction business. Day after day, the student travels to different job sites and helps in taking various measurements. Background knowledge is being created through experiential learning. When the student encounters the concept of measurement in math class, more opportunity exists for building a bridge from that experience and connecting it to the new concept being presented in the classroom.

Schools can offer direct experiential learning opportunities in order to enable growth in background knowledge for each and every student. For example, teachers who present the concept of measurement in math class can provide multiple experiences in using a variety of tools in developing the concept of measuring. Students who are using spring scales, tape measurers, rulers, pedometers, *etc.*, to perform measurements are building background knowledge that will be used to acquire key concepts. They are also building connections to prior experiences that they have already had and are creating new learning.

Field trips, or field studies, offer out-of-class experiential learning opportunities that have the potential for creating tremendous amounts of background knowledge. From historic villages to the state capitol building in Lansing, our students have had a variety of experiences that have greatly enhanced their background knowledge in which they can draw upon in the future. One of the greatest aspects of experiential learning is that you never know when you are going to make a connection between your experiences and future learning. Allowing students to experience learning outside of the classroom promotes the idea that learning does not just have to take place within four walls and in a set of desks and chairs. It takes place while traveling in the car, hiking a trail in the forest, and baking cookies at home. Background knowledge can be built at anytime and in any place.

Schools must be proactive in enhancing students' background knowledge by providing academically-enriching experiences for all students. This can be done both directly and

indirectly, through both in-class and out-of-class experiences. One goal for our school this year is to offer a field study that would take our students to a major Midwestern city and allow them to experience opportunities that they might never be able to have without offering such an event. Narrowing the gap in the classroom can be accomplished by focusing on building background knowledge through deep and enriching educational opportunities offered on a daily basis, both in school and at home. May this be the goal of each and every person who is involved in the education of our children.

“Children are like wet cement. Whatever falls on them makes an impression.” ~Dr. Haim Ginott