

## **Applying Past Knowledge to New Situations**

by

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*“Learning is the ability to make sense out of something you observe based on your past experience and being able to take that observation and associate it with meaning.”*

*Ruth and Art Winter.*

Intelligent human beings learn from reflecting on and making sense of their experiences. When confronted with a new and perplexing problem they will often connect with experiences from their past. They can often be heard to say, "This reminds me of..." or "This is just like the time when I..." They use analogies such as when I see this, it is just like this... or the way this operates is just like the way XX operates.” They use past knowledge and experiences to abstract meaning, carry that understanding forward, and apply it in new situations.

Some students do not use their capacity for making connections, a uniquely human capacity. They approach every situation as if it is the first time they ever saw such a problem or task. It's as if they never heard of it before, even though they may have had the same type of problem just recently. It is as if each experience is encapsulated and has no relationship to what has come before or what comes afterward. Their thinking is what psychologists refer to as an "episodic grasp of reality" (Feuerstein 1980). That is, each event in life is a separate and discrete event with no connections to what may have come before or with no relation to what follows. Furthermore, their learning is so encapsulated that they seem unable to draw forth from one event and apply it in another context.

Anytime you learn something new you need to draw upon two kinds of prior knowledge: connections to the subject at hand *and* knowledge about how learning works. When students know how learning works, they are more easily able to access connections to the subject at hand. Learning how to learn is as important as learning the content. The gap for some student's may be due to their lack of knowledge about how learning works (Paul, 2013). As you begin any new learning, ask yourself such questions as:

- What is the main ideas that I'm supposed to be learning?
- What will be important ideas that I'll will take away?
- What do I already know about this topic?
- What are some experiences that I relate this to?
- What can I do to remember the key ideas?
- What is it about this topic I may not understand, or am unclear about?

Following is a list of appropriate strategies to help you understand and remember what you are learning so that you can draw upon it for future learning. Ask yourself which of these learning strategies you use frequently:

- underlining important parts of a text
- discussing what you are learning with other people
- drawing pictures or diagrams to better understand the subject.
- making up questions that you try to answer about this subject.
- thinking back to what you already know about it.
- practicing the concepts of this subject over and over until you know them well.
- thinking about your thinking, to check if you understand the ideas in this subject.
- going back over it again when you don't understand something.

- making a note of things that you don't understand very well, so that you can follow them up.
- looking back to see how well you did when you have finished.
- organizing your time to manage my learning.
- making plans for how to do the activities that might be suggested.

Remember, connections come to the prepared mind!

*"The world economy no longer pays for what people know but for what they can do with what they know."*

*Andreas Schleicher, Deputy Director for Education*

[Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development](#)

### **References:**

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