

Making Connections: Using Background Knowledge to Build New Learning

Materials: Text: The Weak Shall Inherit the Gym written by Rick Reilly, making connections graphic organizer, chart paper

Background:

The idea of making connections is taking what you know and putting it together with new information to create a stronger knowledge base. Sometimes making connections can be misunderstood as a literal knowledge type of thinking such as, “this character is putting on her bright blue coat, I have one of those too. I got it for Christmas last year.” This type of connection is low level and is not what we are going for in this lessons plan.

The big idea with this lesson is to show readers how to stay actively engaged in what they are reading by taking what they already know and connecting it to new information so that their thinking on the topic will be stronger, deeper and clearer. When new knowledge is created, this is a form of synthesis. Synthesis is higher order thinking. This comprehension strategy supports a way of thinking that is transferable to other pieces of text.

Group size: This lesson can be done with a small group of students or a whole class.

Text: Consider the text and the students’ background knowledge as you plan this lesson. The text: The Weak Shall Inherit the Gym written by Rick Reilly is a good fit for this lesson but there are many other pieces of text that can be used with this lesson. (novels, poems, newspaper or magazine articles, essays etc). Choose a piece of text you know very well and like. Consider the interest of your students as well.

Time: This lesson can be adjusted to the amount of time you have but is likely to take 30 minutes in small group and 40-45 minutes in whole group. It is best if you can get in the before during and after all in one lesson.

Equipment: If you are working with a large group, it would be nice to have a data projector so the text can easily be seen.

Before the read:

Have a quick discussion with the students about making connections as you read. Say: “As you are reading, do you find yourself thinking and connecting what you are reading to something you have done, seen, read or heard?” Explain that “what you have in your head is from your whole life’s story up to this point. You have had experiences, you have been on trips, you have been told stuff, you have seen TV, movies, you have read books and lots of different

kinds of things etc. This is called your background knowledge. When you are reading you are comparing and connecting what you are reading with your background knowledge. This helps you create meaning as you read.” Talking to the students in this manor is considered using explicit language.

Give an overview of the purpose for the read. Say: Today as we are reading we are going to practice making connections by thinking as we read about what we already know and then also thinking about new things that we are learning and adding to our background knowledge. When we make these connections it strengthens our understanding of what we are reading.”

Model for students Say: “Now let’s take a look at the text you are going to be reading.” Give some background knowledge on Rick Reilly of you are using The Weak Shall Inherit the Gym, in order to frame the text. If you are using another piece of text, frame the text to get the readers ready to read. Contextualizing the piece of text will help with engagement level.

Read the title and first two paragraphs aloud to the students and show how you are making connections to your background knowledge but also adding to your background knowledge - new learning. For example you may say... “when I read this part about dodge ball I am thinking about the times that I played dodge ball. I have a picture in my head of what it looks like. I am also learning from the tone of this paragraph that everyone may not feel the same way about dodge ball as I do.” Use the format for the graphic organizer to make your thinking visible for the students. Use can use chart paper, a document camera or any other technology that may be available to you. This modeling is an important step in this lesson.

During the read:

Students practice:

Give the students the graphic organizer that goes with this lesson (Making Connections:Using Background Knowledge to Build New Learning) This organizer is in a T chart format and is broken up into two ways of thinking - “What I am thinking about” and “What I am leaning”.

Instruct your students to read the text silently or with a partner and write down what they are thinking as they read using the graphic organizer to make their thinking visible. Remind them that the ultimate goal is to comprehend what they are reading. Also remind the students that you want them to be able to discuss what they read as well as share their thinking when you come back together as a group.

Conferring: As students are reading the text walk around the room an do “drop in conferences”. This is when you stop to have a quick conversation with the students about the text. This is a nice informal way to assess what is going on

with thinking. Actively listen to each student you speak to and make note of interesting interpretations, engagement level, opinions, interest level etc.

Questions you may ask during the conferences:

Are you noticing any connections you are making with this text?

Are you learning anything new?

Tell me about what you are thinking so far.

Tip:

When students read on their own it is likely that they may come to a word they don't know. This is no different than me or you. We all come to words we don't know when we read. When this happens, the first thing to do is to do nothing. Just give some wait time and see if the reader can figure it out on her own. The tendency for most people is to tell the student the word. We want the student to do the work for herself but of course we can't wait and wait and wait. If you have to interact with the student, try some of the following prompts at the point of error.

Useful Word Level prompts:

Think about what you are reading, what would sound right and make sense?

Is there a part of the word that you know?

Let's read past it and see if the words after it will help. We can go back and reread

Let's keep thinking about this word and talk about it when we come back together as a whole group.

What do you think this word means? Let's use the paragraph as the dictionary and see if we can come up with a meaning.

After the read

Comprehension of text:

When the time is up, ask students to stop reading and come back together to talk about what they have read. Begin the discussion and say: "Let's talk about what we read." We are going for a general discussion about the text so that comprehension can be assessed. With a whole group lesson, you may want to take advantage of partner or small group discussions so that more voices can be heard at first and then debrief in whole group after the small group discussion. When students collaborate and share they can learn from each other and thoughts can be clarified. The thinking they tracked on the graphic organizer may be used during this part of the lesson.

Reflection of the strategy making connections:

After students have discussed the content of the text, ask them to specifically reflect on making connections. Say: "We were practicing making connections. How did this go? Did you find yourself using what you already know to connect

with what you are reading?” Ask for a volunteer to share their thinking. Continue sharing thoughts from the graphic organizer.

Reflective question:

Wrap the lesson up by asking the readers how this way of thinking would help them in reading. Ask: “How does making connections between what you already know and what you are learning, help you as a reader?” Share your own thinking about the use of this strategy if you need to. Sometimes the students can take the lead but other times you may need to jump start them with some modeling of this type of thinking. Here is an example: “When I make connections between what I already know and what I am reading, I can sometimes get a clear picture in my head as to what is going on. For example Rick Reilly mentions dodgeball in the second paragraph. I have played dodgeball before so I could visualize the game at that point. I also learned something new about how people feel. When Rick Reilly said “the school board wants to ban any game with “human targets”...I had never thought about it like this. I felt like I was learning something new.”