

MEANINGFUL LEARNING

LEARNING MORE FOR THE LONG TERM

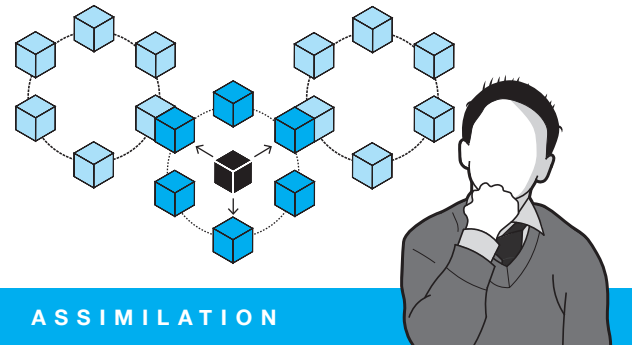
Meaningful... learning is important in education because it is the human mechanism par excellence for acquiring and storing the vast quantity of ideas and information represented by any field of knowledge.



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WHAT IS MEANINGFUL LEARNING?

Students learn meaningfully when they assimilate new ideas with their existing knowledge to produce new meaning. New ideas can be learned meaningfully depending on the amount/quality of connections students make between new ideas and existing knowledge. Learning meaningfully is the most effective way to develop the vast, interconnected and organised bodies of knowledge they need in the subjects they are taught.



HOW DO I MAKE LEARNING MORE MEANINGFUL?

1 EXPLICITLY STATE THE CONNECTIONS

Students must assimilate new ideas with their existing knowledge. But often they won't spot connections. Explicitly tell students how new ideas relate to their existing knowledge. For example, remind students of their understanding of romantic love from Romeo and Juliet. Explain how this is similar and different from a love and devotion to one's country. This link may help them understand the idea of patriotism.

2 TEACH GENERALISED IDEAS FIRST

It's easier to assimilate new ideas under more generalised concepts. For example, students who are taught about democracy will find it easier to assimilate detailed ideas from different historical periods related to this concept. It's better to teach this concept first before students learn about the detail. Plan your curriculum around important generalised concepts in the subject, making sure they reoccur across the curriculum.

3 SET MEANINGFUL PROCESSING TASKS

Even though you've stated the connections between new ideas and students' existing knowledge, this doesn't guarantee they've made the connections. Set tasks that cause students to make connections. For example, you could use self-explanation: students state the links between existing knowledge and the new ideas. You can check students are making useful connections and aren't missing any obvious links.

4 CHECK FOR MEANING

We're interested in how meaningful students make new ideas. This depends on the type/quality of connections they make with their existing knowledge. Be wary of answers that repeat your words verbatim: students may not have made connections of their own. Incorrect answers may suggest they've used the wrong existing knowledge to understand the new idea: help them connect to better existing knowledge.

5 KEEP MEANING ALIVE

Over time, the new meanings students make are subject to forgetting. Forgetting something learned meaningfully happens when the new meaning cannot be accessed anymore and only the original existing knowledge can be recalled. Important ideas need to be revisited and retrieved to keep meaning alive. In particular, details can be forgotten. Track lost detail and revisit it to help students retain access.

6 MOTIVATE MEANINGFUL LEARNING

Meaning is made in the minds of students. It's students that need to understand the value of meaningful learning and exert effort to make meaningful connections. Avoid rewarding verbatim answers as this can communicate that more rote-like learning is valued. Invest time in tasks for meaningful processing and support students to recognise that they are developing bodies of knowledge resulting in deeper understanding.