

Intentional Instructional Moves

Strategic Steps to
Accelerate Student
Learning

Companion Guide

Chapter 6: Learning Connections
Intentional Step One



Chapter 6

Intentional Step One: Help Students Make Relevant, Real-world Connections to the Content

How often have we heard our students ask, "When will I ever use this in real life?" And they have a point. Learning that connects to real-world skills and future careers feels more authentic and purposeful. When we contextualize tasks and projects within actual careers, students can begin to see a future for themselves beyond school. Tasks with actual stakes help them practice skills they can use in future careers, college, and adult life (Edutopia, 2020). For example, a teacher might have students run a print shop for the school where students take orders from teachers and peers, interface with clients, design the printed materials, keep track of deadlines, and perform quality checks to ensure the final products are up to standards. This experience lets them try out different skill sets and explore possible careers to which they might not otherwise be exposed.

Strategy 1: Personal Connections

This strategy helps teachers build connections between the content and students' lives outside of school. For instance, sixth-grade teacher Kristin DeLuca introduced her class to a new unit on fractions with a personal story. She explained that she had been following a recipe to bake cookies but had mistakenly dumped $\frac{1}{3}$ cup of flour instead of $\frac{1}{2}$. Upon realizing her mistake, she noticed that she didn't have enough flour to start over, and she needed to bring the cookies to an event later that evening. She then invited her students to consider how she could have fixed the problem. DeLucas's story helped her students connect to the lesson by relating it to something from their lives outside of school (Ernst-Slavit, 2010). In order to make these

connections, teachers need to understand their students and their interests so they can identify how lessons might be relevant to their lives.

When planning for how to make personal connections, teachers can follow these steps:

1. Identify the main topic or idea for the lesson.
2. Consider students' existing knowledge. What do they already know about the topic?
3. If there aren't obvious connections, broaden the scope of the topic to include more experiences that students are familiar with.

For instance, let's say students are beginning a project on their state's history. Some students might be from that state and have some knowledge of its history, whereas others might have little connection at all. The teacher could then broaden the focus to community history or personal history to help pull in all students and ensure they can relate to the lesson's key concepts. After making these initial connections, the teacher would then direct the focus back to the central idea (Ernst-Slavit, 2010). Once students understand how to make these personal connections, they should be encouraged to do so on their own. Other strategies for facilitating these learning connections include pair shares, quick writes, and brainstorming.

Making personal learning connections helps students integrate new information with prior knowledge (.93), which involves a process known as interleaving (Weinstein, 2018). Interleaving occurs when students combine a variety of topics and strategies to solve a problem. It requires them to think about problems with multiple solutions and choose the best approach. Interleaving also helps extend students' learning beyond the classroom because students understand how to apply solutions rather than just memorizing them, which helps them gain proficiency faster.

Strategy 2: Academic Connections

Academic connections allow students to build associations between new content and what they've previously learned in school. These connections often happen in the form of callbacks to earlier lessons but can also happen across grade levels and disciplines. For example, a teacher might begin class by asking, "Who can remind us what we talked about yesterday?" or invite students to share what they remember about a previous topic. The teacher can then use this discussion to illustrate how the new content builds on those previous lessons (Ernst-Slavit, 2010).

Another way teachers can build academic connections and illustrate real-world applications of the content is through guest speakers and field trips. Inviting visitors into the classroom, especially those with relevant professional experience, exposes students to various career possibilities. They can learn about the skills and responsibilities of a particular occupation and ask questions to explore their interests. Field trips provide hands-on, concrete experience. Moreover, they don't have to be elaborate or involve extensive planning. Exploratory walks outside, for example, can offer plenty of opportunities to connect to content, cultures, and careers. Students might also visit a local business or farm or stop by a construction site to see how a building is put together. If physical trips and in-person guest speakers aren't possible, teachers can arrange virtual visits using video tools (Ernst-Slavit, 2010).

Teachers should be mindful of their goals when connecting guest speakers and field trips to instruction. They should also ask students to make their own connections and reflect on the value of these experiences. Before a field trip or speaker, this type of check-in can be performed

by asking students how they think the person/place connects with their learning. How will this experience enhance their understanding?

Making connections between academic learning and real-world application is an important skill. While personal connections are undoubtedly valuable, finding relevant connections to the content based on previous knowledge (.93) and exposure helps students view learning as a process and take more ownership of finding connections themselves. In addition, the above strategies help students engage in retrieval practices that reinforce what they've learned. Much like books in a library, researchers have found that repeatedly "checking out" or retrieving memories helps strengthen students' retention of them (Weinstein, 2018). Making relevant connections also helps students apply the information they've learned to new situations.