

ALERT



ADOLESCENT LITERACY: ENGAGING RESEARCH AND TEACHING

Make room for BUILDING BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

DID YOU KNOW?

Students need background knowledge to move their learning forward. As Leslie Blauman puts it, “background knowledge is the ‘hook’ to hang new learning on. Without that ‘hook,’ learning often doesn’t ‘stick’ with students.” Background knowledge comes into play when learners connect what they already know to new learning, use their personal knowledge and experiences to access new ideas and situations, and bring past learning experiences to mind to help guide them with new challenges.

Teachers play a key role in helping students build and use background knowledge. When students are actively building their background knowledge, they are more likely to experience success in academic achievement (Marzano, 2004).

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR ADOLESCENT LEARNERS?

Activating prior knowledge helps students make stronger connections and find deeper relevance in learning, and this boosts student engagement (Jensen & Nickelsen, 2008). “If we have some prior knowledge, a point of connection, or even a positive feeling about the new material, our potential to learn is enhanced” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

As students build background knowledge, they increase their sources of reliable information. This is critical at a time when there is so much access to information, but not all of it is credible and valid.

Helping adolescents build background knowledge and teaching the skills to know how, when and why it helps their learning, increases the chances of success. This is especially important as adolescents engage in subject areas that tend to be more specialized, with texts that are often more complex, with processes more specifically defined, and with vocabulary that may be more challenging and further outside the norm of everyday conversation (Fang & Schleppegrell, 2010).

Literacy**GAINS**

“I define *background knowledge* for my students as information a reader has in her head... It is a storehouse of knowledge that provides the reader with an assortment of information. Background knowledge is a repository of memories, experiences, and facts. When information is read in isolation and not connected to existing knowledge, it is forgotten and deemed unimportant. Calling on existing knowledge and experiences is crucial if readers are to assimilate new information.”

Cris Tovani, 2000



IN THE CLASSROOM

GETTING STARTED

“Knowing lots of strategies cannot fully compensate for lack of background knowledge.”

Fisher & Frey, 2009

- Use priming and pre-exposure opportunities through the use of media (e.g., video clips), primary sources, reading passages, manipulatives, and/or experiential learning (e.g., field trips) at the beginning of a unit of study rather than as consolidations of units of study. In this way, the experience serves to anchor later learning, and establish a common, shared experience for all students to draw on.
- Consider how students’ personal and cultural background may affect their prior knowledge, and support students in making their own connections and address misconceptions.
- Allow for talk using partners and small groups, including opportunities for English language learners to use their first language, so that students can build understanding by sharing information with their peers. Students are often able to sort out gaps and pose questions more readily when they have a chance to do some exploratory talk. Also, when learning incorporates social interaction, students’ ability to remember the information improves.
- Consider how their sources of information can be used (e.g., as starting points), and teach students how they can broaden their sources.
- Use assessment tools, such as exit cards or entrance tickets, to assess student prior knowledge, identify any misconceptions and target appropriate entry points for instruction.

TRY IT OUT: READING AND ANALYZING NON-FICTION ORGANIZER

The Reading and Analyzing Non-fiction (RAN) organizer incorporates a number of comprehension strategies to help students make meaning and deepen their understanding of a topic, concept or idea. Similar to a KWL graphic organizer, a RAN chart contains additional columns which explicitly prompt students to track how their thinking is developing as they build their knowledge about a topic.

The organizer prompts students to

- Activate background knowledge before reading, listening or viewing by recording what they may

already know about a select topic, concept or idea in the *Prior Knowledge – What I Think I Already Know* column.

- Confirm understanding and track new information, once they have read, listened and/or viewed more information from a source or variety of sources, in the *Confirmed – What I Seem to Be Correct On* and the *New Learning – What I Learned* columns.

Prior Knowledge	Confirmed	New Learning	Misconceptions	Wonderings
<i>What I think I already know</i>	<i>What I seem to be correct on</i>	<i>What I learned</i>	<i>What I used to think</i>	<i>What I still want to know</i>

- Identify any errors in thinking in the *Misconceptions – What I Used to Think* column. This column, in particular, helps students recognize how their thinking has changed or shifted.
- Pose questions and make connections in the *Wonderings – What I Still Want to Know* column. This helps students extend their thinking and to open up possibilities for further exploration.

This organizer is meant to be dynamic. So as students learn more about a topic, concept or idea, they are encouraged to document changes in thinking over time. For example, if students answer questions in their *Wonderings* column, they can move that information to the *New Learning* column. The dynamic nature of the organizer can be enhanced by using sticky notes for students to move from one column to another, or by creating an adaptable, electronic version.

The RAN, in part or in whole, may be used by students individually, in small groups, or as a whole class.

“Background knowledge is like a teenager’s closet...just because the backpack is in there doesn’t mean he or she can find it!”

Fisher and Frey, 2009

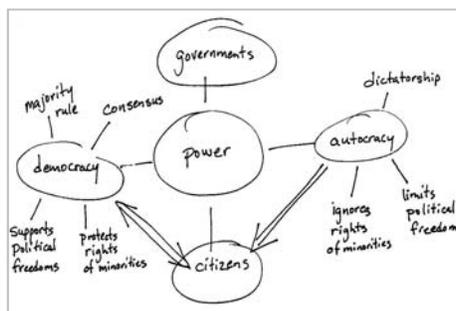
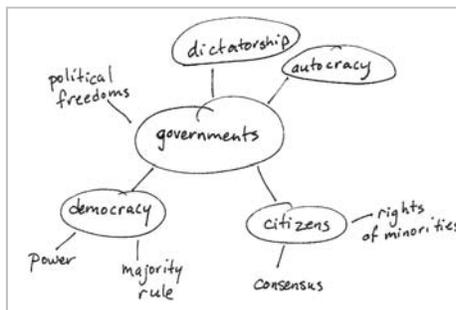
Adapted from Stead, T. (2006). *Reality Checks: Teaching Reading Comprehension with Nonfiction K-5*. Markham, ON: Pembroke Publishers.

HELPING STUDENTS SEE HOW THEIR THINKING CHANGES

In adolescence, students develop a greater capacity to recognize the changes in what they know and think (e.g., I used to think..., but now I think...).

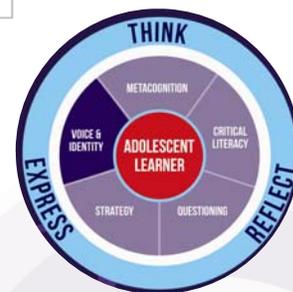
One way to show students that they build on background knowledge is through iterative mind mapping which initially captures their prior knowledge and then the revisions to their thinking over time as they acquire new knowledge and information (Goudvis & Buhrow, 2011).

- Begin by giving students key terms (e.g., 8-10 words) or have them develop their own list related to a topic or unit of study.
- Students, individually or in groups, create mind maps to connect the words based on what they already know and can predict. Students may opt to do this electronically (e.g., using *Smart Ideas* software or *MindMeister* app). These first mind maps can be used to assess students’ prior knowledge. It can also bring forward any misconceptions, gaps or questions that may need to be addressed (e.g, by directing them to particular resources).
- As students engage in further learning on the topic, they continually revise their mind map to capture their new understandings. This makes students’ thinking visible, and it is a way for them to show how their thinking is merging with new information and insights.
- Invite students to talk , with peers and/or teacher, about their revisions and about how their thinking has changed.



Mapping Thinking

The first mind map on the left shows initial attempt based on prior knowledge and predictions. The second mind map shows how the thinking has been revised as the learner builds on background knowledge.



The *Adolescent Literacy Guide* outlines components which support students’ abilities to think, express and reflect. Voice and Identity is one of the components to which this ALERT connects.

- Students continually revisit and revise their mind maps as they learn more.
- After a period of time, for example at the end of a unit, have students reflect on how their thinking has changed and what this means to them as learners.

ARTICLE OF THE WEEK

An approach developed by Kelly Gallagher, *Article of the Week* provides students with on-going opportunities to read short, interesting newspaper and magazine articles to expand their background knowledge.

Gallagher outlines a process:

- Day 1: Students read (e.g., in a read aloud) an article related to the learning goal(s). After the read aloud, students identify any problematic vocabulary or passages (e.g., by using a yellow highlighter) and students “turn and talk” to solve any confusion.
- Day 2 & 3: Students re-read the article to identify key ideas and interesting passages (e.g., using a different colour highlighter) and write comments and questions in the margins. Students use notes to discuss the article in small groups.
- Day 4 & 5: Students prepare responses to the article (e.g., as a written reflection, double-entry journal, supported opinion). Students share their responses with peers and the teacher and receive descriptive feedback.

IN BRIEF

When students actively build background knowledge, they are better able to move forward with their learning. Teachers can support students to build background knowledge by providing them with opportunities to draw on what they already know, understand the reasons and purposes for using background knowledge, and to reflect on how their understanding changes and grows.

REFERENCES

- Blauman, L. (2011). “Building a Better Book Club.” *Comprehension Going Forward*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Fang, Z. & Schleppegrell, M. J. (April 2010). “Disciplinary literacies across content areas: Supporting secondary reading through functional language analysis”, *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, International Reading Association, 53(7), 587-597.
- Fisher, D. & Frey, N. (2009). *Background Knowledge: The Missing Piece of the Comprehension Puzzle*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Gallagher, K. "Article of the Week Archive." *Building Deeper Readers and Writers*. www.kellygallagher.org. Retrieved July 19, 2012.
- Goudvis, A. & Buhrow, B.(2011). “History Lessons.” *Comprehension Going Forward*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Jensen, E. & Nickelsen, L. (2008). *Deeper Learning: Seven Powerful Strategies for In-Depth & Longer-Lasting Learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Marzano, R. (2004). *Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2010). *Differentiated Instruction Facilitator’s Guide*. Toronto: Author.
- Stead, T. (2006). *Reality Checks: Teaching Reading Comprehension with Nonfiction K-5*. Markham, ON: Pembroke Publishers.
- Tovani, C. (2000). *I Read It, But I Don’t Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers*. Portland ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

FOR MORE ON...

Adolescent Literacy

Literacy GAINS. (2012). [Adolescent Literacy Guide: A Professional Learning Resource for Literacy, Grades 7-12](#).

Voice & Identity

Literacy GAINS. (2012). [Research and Practice Connections: Connecting Students’ Lives to their Learning](#)

Promoting Purposeful

Talk

Literacy GAINS. (Fall 2012) [ALERT: Make Room for Talking to Learn](#).