

Research Précis

CONTEXTUALIZED LEARNING: Graphic Organizers and “Reading to Learn”

Reading to learn—just as its corollary “learning to read”—is directly reinforced through the use of context (e.g., setting, scenario, event, phenomena, etc.). Students’ comprehension is directly impacted by a reader’s opportunity to read subject literature and by their preparation and understanding of the subject matter (Anderson, 1984; Levstik and Pappas, 1987; Steffansen, Anderson, & Joag-Dev, 1979). Using graphic organizers, including concept maps, as part of a pre-reading strategy prepares students for their text reading by providing a hook on which to hang their knowledge as it accumulates during the reading process, as well as follow-up for checks on understanding and for shoring up comprehension shortfalls. Often referred to as “fix-up” strategies, these strategies have been proven to be effective when reading for comprehension (Armbruster, et al., 1983; Tei & Stewart, 1985). Moreover, research conducted by the National Reading Panel (2000) uncovered 11 studies clearly indicating that when readers use external organization aids to benefit their understanding, memory and text comprehension improves.

Graphic Organizer?

A graphic organizer is a pictorial or illustrative device that displays relationships. Organizers can take a variety of forms, including expository maps (main ideas of an expository passage or reading), story maps (graphic outlines or relationships of parts and ideas in a story), semantic maps (showing relationships between vocabulary and term meanings), and so forth. Many graphic organizers are referred to as concept maps, because they show the relationships between concepts or components of bigger ideas. In short, graphic organizers are an external means of representing the meaning of relationships in a text. If the text is part of a set of materials that are built around a certain context, the organizer can provide links and relationships within specific focal areas, and can also tie together larger concepts in the macroscopic view.

Graphic organizer - a pictorial or illustrative device that displays relationships.

How are they effective for reading to learn?

The real focus is on organizing thoughts and relationships—between and across ideas, between terms and specialized phrases and vocabulary, between themselves and the study at hand. This requires discussion, comparisons,

During contextualized instruction...

- Establish purpose.
- Organize ideas and relationships.
- Illustrate the organization.

and often debate. The organizer itself is a representation of these relationships, typically in 2D, and in any variety of “looks,” from rectangles or ovals connected by lines or arrows, to figures within figures, to linear or chronological arrangements. Creating the organizers requires skill, and teachers should provide students with the opportunity to practice with a variety of different maps. The essential key to keep in mind is whether or not the organizer serves its purpose, and the purpose should be clear from the outset. Evidence from research has indicated that, in helping students read to learn while learning to read, graphic organizers have been proven effective as:

- visual or spatial representations of superordinate and subordinate ideas of a passage, story, or exposition;
- spatial or graphic metaphors that facilitate learning and memory of text and the making of well-organized summaries; and
- tools that help students focus on text, textual relationships, and text structure while reading.

Contextualization in “Reading to Learn”

In addition to the benefits of graphic organizers, a number of other findings clearly point to the value of using context. Context creates a framework for connecting new learning with prior learning (shown to be effective in 14 studies by the NRP), facilitates the construction of mental imagery (7 studies), assists with integration into the normal curriculum (8 studies), and provides a realistic focus for coordinating multiple processes and strategies in order to construct meaning from texts (38 studies).

During contextualized instruction...

- Connect with prior knowledge.
- Utilize mental imagery.
- Integrate into overall curriculum.
- Employ multiple processes.

About the National Reading Panel Report...

The National Reading Panel (NRP) was convened in 1997 to assess the status of research-based knowledge, including the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching children to read. They provided a report that presented the NRP’s conclusions in December 2000, the *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read*.

Other References:

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