



Delaware Social Studies Education Project
Research Corner

Why Might Transfer Fail?

- The student did not learn what he or she was supposed to learn initially. A few investigators admitted being caught off guard when this explanation unfolded. The point - students can't transfer what they have not learned.
- The student's initial learning was deep and thorough but instruction did not delve into when that learning might be used, applied etc.
- The initial learning occurred in a single context.
- The transfer that one hoped for required more than a transfer of prior learning; it required genuine creativity.
- The focus of instruction involved knowledge that was fundamentally "inert," "passive," "local," or "context bound." The material that was so peculiar to the initial learning that it really does not transfer, at least to the novel task or problem that confronts the student. (Perkins and Salomon, 1988)
- The similarities between the initial learning and the novel task were barely discernible. The transfer was too "far" removed from the initial learning or the perceptions of students. Sometimes, "learners do not see that two or more situations or conditions are similar." (Simons, 1999)
- The investigator or instructor looked for the transfer too quickly. This explanation emerges from the proposition that transfer "enhances" learning i.e. narrows the time that it takes to complete/solve a novel and subsequent task or problem.
- The efforts to promote transfer were not explicit, systematic, or persistent.
- The culture of schooling taught students that there is only one legitimate way to solve a class of problems. (Hatano and Greeno, 1999)
- Traditional conceptualizations of transfer are "impoverished." Learning involves more than a "deployment" of an initial learning. (Carragher and Schliemann, 2002) In other words, learning does not carry over intact or directly from one situation to another. The initial learning has to be adapted (assimilated, accommodated) before the novel problem can be solved.

- The transfer of knowledge cannot occur because knowledge cannot be decontextualized. (Lave, 1988)

The "Bo Peep Theory" of Transfer:

Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep
And can't tell where to find them.
Leave them alone, And they'll come home,
Wagging their tails behind them

The "Bo Peep Theory" of Transfer (Perkins and Salomon, 1988) suggests that the approach to transfer in many educational settings is similar to Bo Peep's approach to getting her sheep back. Bo believes that the sheep will return home with no intervention on her part. Educators, some suggest, treat transfer as if it will take care of itself. But, it does not.

