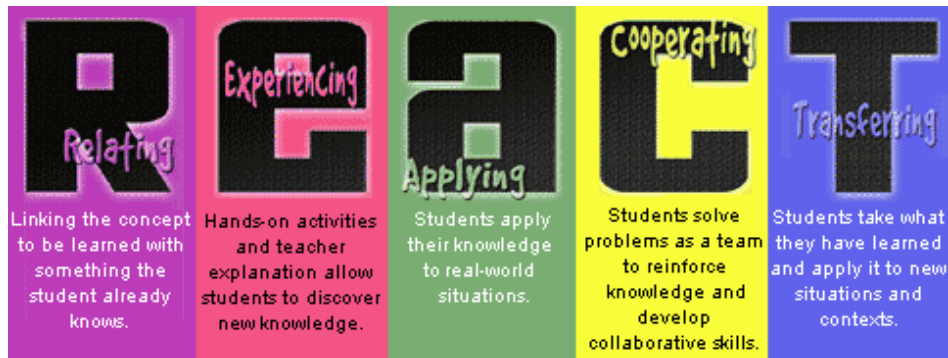


REACTing to Learn: Student Engagement Strategies in Contextual Teaching and Learning

Curricula and instruction based on contextual learning strategies should be structured to encourage five essential engagement strategies: Relating, Experiencing, Applying, Cooperating, and Transferring. In light of learning research these strategies seem “natural,” but as instructors we cannot take it for granted that learners are aware of the strategies that will help them learn, retain, and apply information. We should create learning experiences that use the REACT strategies (below) and we should also take the time to inform learners about why we have selected instructional methods that require their active participation. Furthermore, we should not be surprised if learners need to be taught how to carefully observe and record data, for example, or how to communicate effectively as part of a group. The REACT strategies are designed to help learners build new skills and knowledge regardless of their starting point.



RELATING: *Learning in the context of life experience*—everyday sights, events, and conditions—allows learners to then relate those familiar situations to new information to be processed or problems to be solved.

EXPERIENCING: *Learning in the context of exploration, discovery, and invention*—is the heart of contextual learning. However motivated or tuned-in learners may become as a result of other instructional strategies such as video- or text-based activities, these remain relatively passive forms of learning. And learning appears to “take” far more quickly when learners are able to manipulate equipment and materials.

APPLYING: *Learning by using new concepts and information in a useful context* allows learners to envision future success in careers and postsecondary education. In contextual learning courses, applications are often based on occupational activities—ideally authentic, non-contrived, real-world tasks. These contextual learning experiences may be supplemented with presentations by guest speakers and followed up with firsthand experiences such as plant tours, mentoring arrangements, and internships.

COOPERATING: *Learning in the context of sharing, responding, and communicating with others* is a primary instructional strategy in contextual teaching. The experience of cooperating not only helps the majority of learners learn the material, it also is consistent with the real-world focus of contextual teaching. Employers value employees who can communicate effectively, who share information freely, and who can work comfortably in a team setting. We have ample reason, therefore, to encourage learners to develop these cooperative skills while they are still in the classroom where we can facilitate the process.

TRANSFERRING: *Learning in the context of existing knowledge*, or transferring, uses and builds upon what the learner already knows. Learning to transfer familiar information to new contexts helps learners approach unfamiliar situations and problems with confidence.

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